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AMERICANS MISSING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:
PERCEPTIONS, POLITICS, AND REALITIES

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL WILLIAM H. JORDAN, AR

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AMERICANS MISSING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:
PERCEPTIONS, POLITICS, AND REALITIES

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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8 May 1990

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ABSTRACT

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The issue of American POWs/MIAs from American involvement in the Second Indochina War was the single greatest emotional and political issue to emerge following withdrawal of U.S. combat forces and cessation of hostilities in Vietnam. American policy and motives, although honest and altruistic in intent, vacillated from administration to administration and became a source of disenfranchisement between a large segment of the American electorate and the U.S. Government. The rescue of Americans in captivity or the recovery and subsequent identification of Americans who died in captivity, crashes, or battlefield incidents was a by-product of the ad hoc formalization of the intelligence and operational process. This paper examines this process historically, addressing U.S. policy objectives. Conclusions drawn examine the probability of greater success in the issue compared with alternative foreign policy initiatives. The recommendations stem from lessons painfully derived from the Indochina experience and are applicable to future American conflicts.

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CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE

On 30 November 1968, a South Vietnamese H-34 helicopter carrying seven U.S. and eight indigenous special forces soldiers departed from a launch site in the northern part of the Republic of Vietnam. These operations, conducted by Command and Control--North (CCN), Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG), were launched on an almost daily basis as part of Operation Prairie Fire. Their mission was to disrupt a steady flow of North Vietnamese men and materiel down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and into the Republic of Vietnam. The U.S. and indigenous soldiers were to be inserted onto a hill mass south of the town of Tchepone, Laos. There the team could establish surveillance, monitor the emplacement of aerially-delivered sensors, and, if the opportunity arose, direct airstrikes onto this critical part of the trail.

Over the Xe Pon River, the boundary between Vietnam and Laos, the H-34 and its escorting forward air control (FAC) aircraft came under intense anti-aircraft fire from North Vietnamese gun positions south of Route Coloniale 9. The gun positions were rocketed by U.S. Navy fighters directed by the FAC, but the H-34, raked by 23mm and 37mm fire, exploded and spun lazily down on a small hilltop six hundred meters south of the gun positions. As the duel between the fighters and the gun positions intensified, the FAC orbited the crash, hoping to see someone emerge from the broken, fiercely-burning helicopter...

FOREWORD AND PURPOSE

This paper examines the issue of Prisoners of War/Missing in Action from American involvement in the second Indochina War. Some of the observations in this paper are based on documented events resulting from U.S. domestic and foreign policy through seven succeeding administrations, beginning with American combat involvement during President Kennedy's administration. Other observations are personal and stem from my service as Deputy Commander of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center during the period July 1987 through June 1989 and my participation in negotiations with counterparts from the governments of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic (LPDR). Some of these personal observations and beliefs are also the result of participation in operational crash-site investigations and excavations in the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam and along the Ho Chi Minh trail in eastern Laos during the same period.

The thesis I have developed is twofold--the lack of a framework, intelligence or study of North Vietnamese policy objectives with regard to American POWs and MIAs prior to the commencement of losses hampered the rescue and resolution process during the war, and to a certain extent, hampers it today. The ad hoc approach to formalization of the process in the early years was at best a patchwork fix for what became the most emotional aspect of the war. We entered the war without a careful estimate of the situation or review of the French experience in the first Indochina War, or of our own experience

in the Korean War. This shortcoming prevented decisiveness and consensus among the responsible arbiters of fate of these missing Americans--the Intelligence community and the political decision-makers. This shortcoming leads to my second conclusion--the politicizing of this issue has created additional and undue burdens of grief for the families and next-of-kin of the missing men, and turned their hostility away from the enemy and toward our government and the military services in which their loved ones served.

Thus the POW/MIA issue has critically hampered the post-war healing process--both domestically and abroad. In addition, it severely restricted American foreign policy latitude in dealing with our Indochinese enemies, and still restricts it today.

THE ANTECEDENTS: HISTORICAL COMPARISON OF PREVIOUS WARS

A cross-section comparison of casualties of 20th century American military conflicts is revealing and disturbing:¹

| | WWI | WWII | KOREA | INDOCHINA |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| POW'S: | | | | |
| Returned: | 3,973 | 116,129 | 4,439 | 725 |
| Missing: | 3,350 | 78,751 | 8,177 | 2,413 |
| BATTLE DEATHS: | 53,402 | 291,557 | 33,629 | 47,381 |
| NON-BATTLE DEATHS: | 63,114 | 113,842 | 20,617 | 10,752 |
| NUMBER SERVING: | 4,734,991 | 16,112,566 | 5,720,000 | 8,746,790 |

During World Wars I and II and Korea, no formal framework, organizational apparatus, or military units were dedicated primarily to the mission of collecting and analyzing intelligence regarding POWs and operationally rescuing them. The underground system in place in Europe during the Second World War was a by-product of resistance movements and the assistance of prisoners in escape efforts was a collateral mission.

Although several POW rescue missions were undertaken in WW II, they were the result of conventional military operations or opportune military circumstances, such as the Los Banos prison camp raid in the Philippines by U.S. airborne forces.²

The overwhelming majority of losses in the Korean War were ground losses, many of them occurring above the 38th Parallel in territory U.S./U.N. forces would not control again during or after the war. Denial of access thus became the greatest factor in preventing resolution of these casualties. An active battlefield recovery operation was conducted during and after the conflict in areas that remained under friendly control. It was

relatively successful in the recovery of remains.³ Subsequent identifications were made largely through identity tags and personal effects or circumstances known about the loss, such as soldiers missing after an engagement or witnessed deaths and post-combat recovery.

During the conflict in Indochina, the overwhelming majority of detained and missing personnel were pilots or aircrews. The circumstances of conducting the air war in denied territory such as North Vietnam and Laos created this situation. Aerial search and rescue techniques were much more highly developed and refined during the Vietnam War. The U.S. Air Force alone accounted for 2,750 successful rescues under hostile conditions and 1,328 rescues under non-hostile circumstances.⁴ Technological advances such as refined survival radios and homing devices and the air-refueled rescue helicopter contributed greatly to the proportionally greater number of rescues in hostile territory.

In addition, forensic techniques developed and perfected during and after this conflict were much more advanced and resulted in a far greater percentage of subsequent identifications than in previous conflicts. Forensics has been one of the single greatest factors in reducing the numbers of unresolved missing personnel.⁵ Improved records keeping by all the armed services, particularly in medical and dental records, enhanced the identification and resolution process immeasurably.⁶

ENDNOTES

1. Autodin Message: Office of the Secretary of Defense, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs (OSD/ASD-PA); dated 292131Z July 1987.
2. Edward Flanagan, LTG USA (RET), The Los Banos Raid.
3. Command Briefing, Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii, (CILHI).
4. Hearings Before the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, Ninety-Fourth Congress, First Session, Part 3, February 4, 18, and 25; March 3, 17, 25, and 31 (Hereafter called Hearings--House Select Committee and dated), pp. 368-371.
5. CILHI Command Briefing.
6. Ibid.

CHAPTER II

FORMALIZING THE PROCESS

There was a facet of the Indochina experience, however, that differed sharply from the POW/MIA experience in previous wars--the service and rank demographics of the captured and missing. Following the initial Tonkin Gulf bombings in 1964, it became apparent that the vast majority of captured and missing personnel would be aircrews held in denied territory. Coinciding with the buildup of U.S. forces in 1965, intelligence priorities were shifted and acquisition capabilities were increased substantially to prepare for this eventuality.¹

In April 1966, the intelligence community assigned top priority to the collection of information concerning POWs and MIAs. This effort involved U.S. intelligence sources world-wide (including the Defense Attache system) and sought assistance from friendly foreign intelligence sources. The major agencies of the U.S. government charged with oversight of the POW/MIA issue were the State Department, Department of Defense, Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and the intelligence branches of the military services. These organizations formed the interagency apparatus that managed the operational and intelligence process and formulated policy on the POW/MIA issue that widened as the war progressed.

Initially parochialism was a prominent factor in this process, particularly between the intelligence agencies that had to operationally commit assets to the problem. In June 1966, the

Democratic Republic of Vietnam announced that captured American airmen would be tried as war criminals in retaliation for U.S. bombing of targets in North Vietnam. This announcement shocked and outraged American public opinion and resulted in a sharp streamlining of the entire system of collecting, disseminating, and processing information on captured and missing personnel. Hanoi's announcement of the trials thus muted parochial interests of the intelligence organizations and smoothed interagency cooperation to an unprecedented degree.²

The Central Intelligence Agency and the military services gathered information on such matters as prison camp locations, movement of prisoners, and identification of captives. In Vietnam, an extensive information network consisting of interrogation and debriefing centers in liaison with similar agencies in Laos and Cambodia was instituted. This network gathered valuable intelligence information from ralliers, captured personnel and refugees. The very best of these sources were exhaustively debriefed in depth; they divulged valuable information on the makeup of the prison system, techniques and policy of exploiting prisoners, location of prisons and, less frequently, photographic identification of prisoners.³

Photographic and electronic intelligence methods were utilized to evaluate information; this evidence supported operational planning for rescue attempts. The CIA managed a campaign to obtain information on detained personnel from worldwide media coverage in friendly, hostile and non-aligned nations. The Defense Intelligence Agency had responsibility for analysis

of this information; the DIA's work led to confirmation that many MIAs were being held as POWs.

Escaped and released American and allied prisoners, although relatively few in number, provided much insight into the prison camp systems and Americans detained in them. Communist radio broadcasts were monitored continually for information growing out of propaganda claims that might be operationally exploited. Alleged confessions from POWs were carefully examined for general information on the physical and psychological conditions of the prisoners. Communications intelligence was used to confirm shootdowns and provide information on movement and relocation of prisoners.⁴ Indigenous teams, particularly in Laos, maintained safe sites in mountainous regions and relatively secure bastions such as patrol bases and resupply airfields. These locations, known as Lima Sites, were numbered and the information provided to aircrews in case of shootdown. In a number of instances, pilots and crewmembers were able to exfiltrate to one of these safe sites and be extracted.⁵ In addition, these teams were instrumental in investigating various prison camps, crashsites, and reported sightings of Americans in captivity. These efforts provided much intelligence data, which was increasingly refined. This data base eventually included thousands of debriefing and interrogation reports, an analysis and collation of escapee and releasee debriefings, information from sensitive sources as well as unclassified information from the media, pictures and research on grave sites, and eyewitness reports from combat actions in which servicemen were lost.

Thus, as the war dragged on, our intelligence regarding MIAs and POWs inevitably increased in volume. Moreover, we became much more sophisticated and thorough in collecting and processing this information. In the realm of intelligence, we had overcome our lack of preparation. But recovery and resolution proved to be another matter.

ENDNOTES

1. Hearings--House Select Committee, dated March 17, 1976.
2. Ibid., p. 121.
3. Ibid., pp. 122-123.
4. Ibid., p 124.
5. Lima Sites and Landing Fields in Laos, Unclassified Air America Document, pp. 32-34.

CHAPTER III
SEARCH, RECOVER, IDENTIFY
THE JPRC AND THE FORENSIC IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

The Joint Personnel Recovery Center (JPRC) was activated on 17 September 1966 as an integral part of the MACV Studies and Observation Group, Vietnam (MACSOG/V), Operational Detachment 18. It would provide an operational focal point and enable U.S. forces to capitalize on the intelligence network in place. Operationally, its purpose was to plan, coordinate and, in some cases, direct the recovery of evadees or prisoners. Although no organizational units were directly assigned, it assumed coordinating authority for the employment of special operational forces as well as conventional forces in rescue efforts.¹

Additionally, its mission was to pursue the longterm task of recovering U.S. personnel after search and rescue (SAR) operations had been suspended. The JPRC also served as the coordinating agency for the recovery of personnel who managed to evade capture or escape, or those who were occasionally released from captivity by the enemy.

The JPRC represented a significant and unique organizational response to the issue of recovering missing personnel. For the first time in the history of the U.S. military, a unit with superb intelligence assets and specially trained personnel was assigned the sole mission of recovery of personnel. In addition, JPRC agents and operatives were authorized to deal directly with neutral parties or enemy personnel willing to provide information

or prisoners for a monetary award or favorable consideration by U.S./R.V.N. authorities. It also provided an organizational framework that would be the basis for casualty resolution to the present day.²

The most significant intelligence information--including live sighting reports, known and suspected PW camp locations, rallier and agent reports, and debriefing of escapees and releasees--was assembled into dossiers on individual and multiple losses. This system was code named the Bright Light system and would eventually be computerized for instant search and information retrieval.³

Forensic identification was generally the responsibility of the Joint Graves Registration office in Saigon, assisted by the U.S. Army mortuary at Tan Son Nhut Air Base and the U.S. Air Force Mortuary at Da Nang. These efforts, primarily on flesh-covered remains, were made initially through normal pathological techniques such as comparison of dentition with existing records and fingerprinting. Non-flesh-covered remains beyond the scope of the capabilities in Saigon were shipped to Japan for attempted identification by U.S. Army-contracted pathologists.⁴

From its inception, the JPRC expanded and refined its records, assisted aerial SAR efforts and attempted overt rescue attempts that were largely unsuccessful because of the remote location of PW camps and frequent movement of them. By the time that U.S. ground combat would formally cease, the JPRC had formed the nucleus of an organization that would be an instrument of the Paris Peace Accords.

ENDNOTES

1. This information is quoted from a single page of the USPACOM Annual Historical Review and is undated and unattributable as to source; it was furnished to the author by LCOL Paul D. Mather, USAF.
2. Interview with Donald E. Lunday, Col., US Army War College, 17 February 1990.
3. JCRC Unit History, dated June 1975, pp. 7-8.
4. Telephone interview with Mr. Thorne Helgesen, GS-12, Casualty Resolution technician, CILHI; 4 February 1990.

CHAPTER IV

THE FOUR PARTY JOINT MILITARY TEAM

The Four Party Joint Military Team (FPJMT) was established in accordance with Article 10 (A) of the Protocol on Captured Persons in the Vietnam Agreement and Protocols (Paris Peace Accords) formally signed on 27 January 1973. The four signatories to the Accords (the United States, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG)) provided delegations to implement terms of the Accords.

The U.S. delegation to the Four Party JMT was the last American military presence in Vietnam, and their responsibility lay primarily in supervising the protocols of the Agreement and negotiation with the hostile sides in all operational and administrative matters as well as POW/MIA matters. This latter responsibility included negotiation with the DRV and PRG on operational aspects of casualty resolution.¹

FPJMT efforts included obtaining information about the location of graves of prisoners who had died in captivity or who had been killed in action with no subsequent recovery of remains, obtaining entry rights for the search operations into areas in which remains were believed to exist and acquiring information about other missing Americans.

The need for an operational records/recovery organization solely dedicated to the resolution process had been identified earlier. As a result, the Joint Casualty Resolution Center

(JCRC) was formed by combining the personnel and equipment assets of the JPRC and the Joint Graves Registration Office and mortuary personnel who had relocated initially to Nakhon Phanom, and later to Samae San, Thailand. While in Thailand, the JCRC refined their records and data base and updated intelligence information gleaned from HUMINT, PHOTINT and SIGINT channels.²

Professional forensic pathologists, medical and dental records of many of the missing men and an infusion of high-technology equipment expanded the capabilities of the forensic identification organ of the JCRC. This organization was renamed the Central Identification Laboratory, Thailand (CILTHAI). It was charged with the identification of all remains recovered in southeast Asia and the Pacific but remained a subordinate unit of the JCRC.

The JCRC was formed just a few days prior to the signing of the agreement on the 27th of January 1973. It remained under the operational control of the U.S. Delegation until the shootdown of an ARVN helicopter carrying U.S. and Vietnamese members of a JCRC investigative team in December 1973. The U.S. team leader, Captain Clair Rees, was killed as he raised his hands above his head to show that he was unarmed. The PRG and DRV delegation blamed the incident on lack of coordination on the RVN's part.³ This incident was the catalyst for the fundamental change in operational techniques that included redeploying back to Vietnam and operating from "safe havens" with Vietnamese and other indigenous personnel performing actual recovery operations. This organization, which averaged about 155 personnel during this time

frame, consisted of U.S. Army special forces, graves registration specialists, and limited numbers of USAF and USMC personnel, usually with a special operations background. Following the fall of the Republic of Vietnam to Communist forces in the spring of 1975, the unit moved to Barbers Point, Hawaii. There they began preparing for negotiations for the return of missing Americans--a slow, torturous process that would be almost as divisive as the war itself.⁴

ENDNOTES

1. Four Party Joint Military Team, U.S. Delegation, Four Party Joint Military Team, History--31 March-31 December 1973, (undated document), p. 19.
2. Joint Casualty Resolution Center, BG Kingston, CDR, Joint Casualty Resolution Center, End of Tour Report, dated 10 December 1973, pp. 14-20.
3. Ibid., p. 21.
4. Ibid., pp. 21-22.

CHAPTER V
THE NUMBERS--AND THEIR EFFECTS

By 1973, over 2,500 military personnel and civilians were carried on the rolls as Missing in Action, acknowledged Prisoners of War, or Killed In Action, Body Not Recovered (KIA/BNR). These losses produced significant emotional and political impacts on the families and the American people following our withdrawal from Indochina.

Most significant, was the fact that the war, which was initially forecast to be short, became the most protracted war in American history, particularly in terms of missing Americans.¹ Over a decade passed between the time Captain Walter Moon was captured in Laos in the spring of 1961 to the spring of 1973 when Operation Homecoming resulted in the ostensible return of all detained U.S. personnel. In addition, only a few individuals classified as MIAs were returned, which had a serious negative impact to those family members.²

Overall, families and next-of-kin believed that the Vietnamese were conducting political chicanery by withholding information on these unresolved cases. Particularly disturbing were those cases of airmen observed to be in the hands of their captors but who were not acknowledged by the Vietnamese to be in the prison system. These cases, which would become known as "discrepancy" cases or "compelling evidence" cases in subsequent negotiations years later, were the underpinnings of distrust for the Vietnamese by both the families and the administrations.³

Vietnamese refusal to acknowledge further information on these cases fanned the central theme of the issue--the question of live Americans detained against their will. The return of known U.S. Marine defector Bobby Garwood in 1979 further fanned the "live sighting" issue.⁴ Refugees, first trickling illegally out of Vietnam in 1978, told stories of seeing Americans or caucasians detained in various parts of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Later, as their numbers grew to a flood under the auspices of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), these stories were greatly expanded. Initially, the JCRC--and later U.S. military attaches and other U.S. agencies and international organizations in the regions--forwarded reports on live sightings from refugees in camps in Thailand, the Phillipines, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Macau. Eventually reports were being taken from Indochinese refugees, escapees, and emigrants from all over the world.

By 1981, new emphasis had been put on live sightings and additional U.S. military and intelligence assets were committed to both resolution of cases through negotiation and analysis and investigation of live sighting reports by additional refugee interviews that provided the basis for negotiation and diplomatic overtures to the governments of Vietnam and Laos.⁵ The Status Review process, coupled with the uncertainty and frustrations of the discrepancy cases, drove another divisive wedge between the American people and succeeding administrations.

ENDNOTES

1. Larry J. O'Daniel, Missing in Action: Trail of Deceit, p. 83.
2. Ibid., pp. 84-85.
3. These cases, still referred to as discrepancy or compelling evidence cases, continue to highlight this distrust. When General Vessey visited Hanoi in August 1987 as President Reagan's Presidential Emmisary, he carried 70 such cases to Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach. The JCRC had selected these capture or shootdown incidents because they were illustrative of "compelling evidence" cases that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam should recognize.
4. Robert Shaplen, Bitter Victory, p. 62.
5. Final Interagency Report of the Reagan Administration on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia, 19 January 1989, p. 14.

CHAPTER VI

STATUS REVIEW AND THE ACCOUNTING PROCESS

The legal status of servicemen missing in action stems from Public Law, specifically the Missing Persons Act outlined in Chapter 10, Title 37, United States Code. The fundamental directives from this legislation require the services to continue the serviceman's pay and allowances while he is in a missing status. These provisions enable the Service Secretaries to make dispositions on pay, allowances and benefits. Most importantly, the provisions also require a review of the status of the missing individual to determine findings that are appropriate.¹ One of the most important provisions states:

(a) When a member of a uniformed service entitled to pay and allowances under section 552 of this title has been in a missing status, and the official report of his death or of the circumstances of his absence has not been received by the Secretary concerned, he shall, before the end of a 12-month period in that status, have the case fully reviewed. After that review and the end of the 12-month period in a missing status, or after a later review which shall be made when warranted by information received or other circumstances, the Secretary concerned, or his designee, may--

(1) if the member can reasonably be presumed to be living, direct a continuance of his missing status; or

(2) make a finding of death.

(b) when a finding of death is made under subsection (a) of this section, it shall include the date death is presumed to have occurred for the purpose of--

(1) ending the crediting of pay and allowances;

(2) settlement of accounts; and

(3) payment of death gratuities.

That date is--

(A) the day after the day on which the 12-month period in a missing status ends; or

(B) if the missing status has been continued under subsection (a) of this section, the day determined by the Secretary concerned, or his designee.²

Under the provisions of the Missing Persons Act, a service Secretary has three options: (1) when, and if, he receives information that conclusively establishes that a member is dead, he shall issue a report of death; (2) without definitive information, he must review each case prior to the first anniversary of the loss and either continue the missing status; or (3) issue a finding of death when the circumstances are such that he can no longer presume that the member might be alive.³

Many next of kin were under the mistaken impression that a case had to be reviewed annually. In fact, the law mandates only a single review prior to the first anniversary of loss.⁴

There is ambiguity in the service regulations that implement the provisions of the Missing Persons Act. The U.S. Air Force regulation states that a finding of death is warranted when "available information indicates beyond any reasonable doubt that a missing person could not have survived." However, U.S. Army guidance provides that "conclusive evidence of death must be more than an indication of death. The facts must be such that death is the only plausible alternative under the circumstances."⁵ Thus, the review process itself contains vagaries in interpretation of the implementing regulations that creates variance in casualty resolution among the services.

The four basic legal statuses derived from Title 37 are: Prisoner of War (POW), Missing in Action (MIA), Killed in Action (KIA) and Killed in Action/Body not Recovered (KIA/BNR). Through the status review process, a status can be changed from Missing in Action to Missing in Action/Presumed Dead, or conversely, from a "dead" to a "live" status, if evidence confirms this fact.

This Presumptive Finding of Death is usually a normal result of the review process when no evidence is found that supports continuation of a live status.⁶ The Presumptive Finding of Death (PFOD) became one of the greatest points of contention between the families and the services--any change in status from POW or MIA effectively changed a missing individual from a status of alive to dead.

During the Korean war, approximately 30 instances of individuals who had been declared legally dead through presumptive findings turned up in the prisoner exchanges known as "Little Switch" and "Big Switch" after the war. During the Viet Nam war, in the late 1960's, a few naval aviators carried initially in a status of KIA/BNR were found to be in captivity.⁷

These and other factors, such as the natural reluctance to relinquish hope for a brother aviator and naval officer, were instrumental in optimizing findings. A ground loss investigation involving American combat units was typically chaired by a U.S. Army major, usually the battalion executive officer with two other junior officers in attendance as an ad hoc investigating

board. The incident had to be investigated within seven days of occurrence but more typically it was conducted within hours of the incident because of the sensitivity of the problem.

I witnessed four such boards in Northern I Corps during 1967. All findings resulted in MIA statuses even when circumstances clearly suggested that "death was the only plausible alternatives under the circumstances" in two of these cases. Findings such as these, however, are retrospectively still easily understood. These findings were almost invariably made by junior officers with a close affinity for the enlisted soldiers. Eyewitness accounts were often rending and came from young soldiers emotionally drained from very recent combat. For psychological reasons and to maintain morale, young officers would be reluctant to make a presumptive finding of death unless such a finding could not be avoided. In addition, during the status review process conducted during and after the Vietnam War, pay and benefits continued to accrue for individuals listed in the "alive" category, so considerations for the family were very much a part of the psychological implications of findings. Thus the ground war in the south probably produced an unrealistic number of personnel carried in status as Missing in Action.

Part of the post-war difficulty in status review and resolution stems from the geographic distribution of losses and cultural differences of our enemies. Both these factors preclude the application of a "universal" formula for resolution of cases in North Vietnam, South Vietnam and Laos.

ENDNOTES

1. Douglas Clarke, The Missing Man, p. 19.
2. Ibid., p. 20.
3. Ibid., p. 21.
4. Ibid., p. 22.
5. Ibid., p. 14.
6. Larry J. O'Daniel, MIA--Trail of Deceit, pp. 74-75.
7. Clarke, p. 24.

CHAPTER VII

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF LOSSES AND THE ACCOUNTING PROCESS

The geographic breakdown of casualties shortly after the fall of South Vietnam is depicted in the following chart:¹

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF CASUALTIES NOT RECOVERED

| COUNTRY | POW/MIA | KIA/BNR | TOTAL |
|---------------|---------|---------|-------|
| NORTH VIETNAM | 475 | 294 | 769 |
| SOUTH VIETNAM | 541 | 566 | 1,107 |
| LAOS | 344 | 206 | 550 |
| CAMBODIA | 28 | 47 | 75 |
| CHINA | 4 | 0 | 4 |

NOTE: This data was current in 1976 when it was presented by the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia.

The casualties incurred in China resulted from shootdowns of aircraft striking targets in the northern reaches of the Red River Delta. After the signing of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, the PRC repatriated the remains of three naval aviators and one prisoner of war who had strayed over Chinese airspace.

In North Vietnam, with its populace culturally rooted in ancestor worship and tied to the land, large scale relocation did not occur. A tremendously organized structure from the hamlet through the province and on to the national authorities was designed to keep the citizenry actively engaged in the capture of downed U.S. aircrews and the recapture of escapees.² Recent operational recovery experience in North Vietnam confirms the fact that the Vietnamese were inveterate record keepers, particularly in terms of captured personnel and burial sites of prisoners who died in captivity.

In eastern Laos, particularly along the Ho Chi Minh trail, the indigenous populace was largely tribal and semi-nomadic, so large scale repopulation to the mountainous, remote northwestern regions of Laos was a common occurrence. In addition, all of eastern Laos was totally under North Vietnamese control at the time of the heaviest commitment of U.S./ARVN airpower, combined special operations, and conventional ARVN forces.

The Lao, even in areas clearly under Pathet Lao control, showed little interest in record-keeping on burial sites or other related matters that did not present the political or propaganda opportunities that live prisoners offered.

American pilots and special operations ground troops killed in eastern Laos were killed predominantly by north Vietnamese forces and records probably exist on their burial; however, the Vietnamese have persistently refused to acknowledge their wartime presence in Laos in all negotiation sessions to date.

The relative remoteness of crashsites in Laos and the generally highly-accurate search and rescue (SAR) reports and crash location data have led to far more successes in crashsite excavation and recovery operations there than they have in North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese almost always rapidly gained control of the crash site in the heavily-urbanized northern reaches of Vietnam. They quickly removed or scavenged the wreckage and buried crew members.³

The following table depicts POWs/MIAs by service and shows the results of service-conducted status reviews. Note that the years span three presidential administrations. Starting with the

the period Jan-Sep 1978, there is a rapid increase of personnel moved from the "alive" categories to the "dead" categories. Part of the reasons for this phenomenon lie in the politicization of the issue even further when normalization of relations with Vietnam became a key issue midway through the Carter presidency.

POWs/MIAs BY SERVICE⁴

| | Army | | Navy | | USAF | | USMC | | |
|-------------|---------|----|---------|-----|---------|-----|---------|----|--------|
| Date | MIA/POW | | MIA/POW | | MIA/POW | | MIA/POW | | TOTAL |
| 31 Dec 72 | 355 | 87 | 138 | 169 | 722 | 309 | 110 | 26 | 1,916* |
| 30 Jun 74 | 279 | 12 | 90 | 20 | 508 | 6 | 93 | 2 | 1,010 |
| 31 Dec 76 | 211 | 11 | 59 | 18 | 407 | 2 | 46 | 2 | 756 |
| 30 Sep 77 | 196 | 10 | 54 | 16 | 378 | 2 | 44 | 2 | 702 |
| 28 Jan 78 | 186 | 9 | 34 | 8 | 342 | 1 | 40 | 2 | 622 |
| 30 Sep 78** | 77 | 6 | 11 | 5 | 153 | 1 | 27 | 2 | 282 |

SOURCE: Department of Defense Comptroller, quoted in Clarke

*Includes confirmed POW'S that would be repatriated in 1973

** figures would continue to decline throughout the Carter Presidency

This table shows that at the conclusion of the six year period between 31 Dec 72 and 30 Sep 78 that change in status from MIA to MIA/Presumed Dead and KIA/BNR would be 78.4 percent, 78.8 percent, and 76.0 percent for the Army, Air Force and Marines respectively, and 92.1 percent for the Navy. Extrapolating correlative data from the table shows two things--there was no appreciable difference in status changes by geographic region of ground, air or water loss, and that all services changed status at similar rates except the U.S. Navy, which would classify known over-water losses resulting from carrier operations more rapidly.⁵

One of the greater tragedies of the issue of missing Americans was the politicizing of the issue by both the Vietnamese and the various U.S. administrations and the effects it had on the families and concerned citizens. Eventually, on a smaller scale, this issue would become as divisive as the war itself.

ENDNOTES

1. Douglas Clarke, The Missing Man, p. 66.
2. JCRC/CILHI investigators were amazed at the detailed descriptions and reports that were unearthed in military museums in remote provinces such as Son La. These investigations, through 1988, 1989, and currently are turning up valuable items such as awards and certificates passed out by the SRV to private citizens for their part in the capture of downed U.S. airmen. Corroborating evidence such as dates, and type aircraft are valuable aids in resolution of these cases.
3. On the crashsite investigation described in the latter part of the paper, the author witnessed an unbelievable amount of crashsite wreckage being used around the Vietnamese city of Thai Nguyen. This is used as roofing and siding for dwellings, buckets and other utensils, etc. In Laos, the "reurbanization" of the Ho Chi Minh trail network has made scavenging for crashsite wreckage a cottage industry between the Lao and their market audience, the Thais, who have set up a metal processing plant on the border near the Lao city of Savannakhet. JCRC Thai and Lao speaking crashsite investigators have actually pulled identifying data plates off aircraft wreckage in this plant. Diplomatic demarches are underway, so far with little success, to curtail this activity.
4. Clarke, p. 69.
5. Interview with James C. Cole, LTC, U.S. Army Casualty Office, USPERSCOM, Alexandria, 5 February 1989.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LEAGUE OF FAMILIES AND THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

The organization that would eventually have the greatest impact on the issue began through the efforts of Sybil Stockdale, wife of prisoner of war Commander James B. Stockdale (later, Vice-Admiral and Congressional Medal of Honor winner).¹ Because the military services had dealt with families and next-of-kin largely on an individual basis, Mrs. Stockdale sought out other families of missing men in the San Diego area and provided a common focal point for concern and support.

Meeting in each other's homes and sharing sympathy and mutual objectives, the informal organization eventually requested and received a visit from members of the Department of Defense who had cognizance in the issue. During this 1968 visit, the 35-member group chaired by Mrs. Stockdale discussed their mutual views and voiced their concerns over the issue.²

A great portion of that concern dealt with the intransigence the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was displaying by refusal to abide by established principles, particularly with regard to revealing to international humanitarian organizations the names of men in captivity. The group further lamented the sparse mail received from the prisoners and this concern was picked up by the press. The resultant public interest acted as a catalyst in mobilizing the families and next of kin.

Prior to May 1969, the Nixon administration adopted a policy of "keeping quiet" about the fate of the POWs because of the

peace negotiations that were being put together as an adjunct to President Nixon's plan of Vietnamization. The administration's rationale, articulated by the State Department, stemmed from the belief that a public outcry against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam would have a deleterious effect on attempts to negotiate an ending to the war.³

Defense Secretary Melvin Laird led the attack on this policy. He succeeded in convincing President Nixon to "go public" on the issue to rally domestic and international support for the POWs.⁴ Consequently Mrs. Stockdale's original group, now greatly expanded and known officially as The National League of Families of Servicemen Missing in Southeast Asia, coalesced political support. It rapidly grew to be an influential interest group and the single greatest focal point between the American electorate and the Nixon administration and succeeding administrations.

During President Ford's interregnum, U. S. policy called for full accounting as a pre-condition for any kind of normalization process. During the election campaign, President Ford clung to that rationale and virtually shelved any progress on the action by forcing the Vietnamese government into a quagmire--there simply was not a way to provide an accounting for all individuals lost.⁵

Governor Carter criticized Ford for lacking a pro-active approach to the issue and gained a significant political advantage that undoubtedly assisted in his 1976 election victory. The President's task was eased considerably by a report issued by

the House select Committee on Southeast Asia headed by Congressman Sonny Montgomery. This committee had been formed in late 1975 to focus congressional scrutiny on the issue. The report stated that "no Americans are still being held alive as prisoners in Indochina or elsewhere, as a result of the war in Indochina", but also stated that "a total accounting by the Indochinese governments is not possible and should not be expected."⁶

Interestingly enough, President Carter had not stated a specific stance on Vietnam during his tenure as governor. His political platform during the campaign was one of a "Post war Presidency" and his foreign policy agenda was restoration of relations--a facet of his personal idealized beliefs and normative approach in international diplomacy.

Nayan Chanda, Washington correspondent for the Far Eastern Economic Review and an astute observer of the post-war Indochina political scene, interviewed Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, who was charged with normalization:

"I don't think that Carter had the slightest feeling on the issue. Carter's only interest in Vietnam was its symbolic importance, because one of the reasons he had been elected was the feeling that he was our post-Vietnam candidate. He was very interested in normalizing with China and Cuba. He wanted to normalize with everybody."⁷

Normalization was one of the very first items on the Carter administration's agenda. At the suggestion of Secretary of State Vance, President Carter appointed Leonard Woodcock, a prominent labor leader, skilled negotiator and campaign supporter, as

Presidential Envoy to Hanoi to discuss the issue. Woodcock was authorized to discuss the possibility of humanitarian aid instead of reparations the Vietnamese thought they were going to receive based on the Nixon letter dispatched in secret to Premier Pham van Dong.

Resentment quickly spread among the members of the National League of Families at this perceived linkage of the issue to international political objectives. The issues of normalization and post-war restoration of relations were now completely intertwined with the numbers of missing Americans and the perceived impossibility of resolution. Fundamental antipathy that had been channeled toward the Democratic Republic of Vietnam now turned toward the new administration. An unnamed State Department official reportedly stated: "The whole part of the Woodcock commission's trip was to declare that the MIAs are all dead."⁸

I conversed with members of the League of Families at their annual convention during July 1988 in Washington, D. C. Most members felt that there had been a "rush to judgment" during the Carter administration in terminating the issue. This was manifested, they felt, largely by quicker and less thorough status reviews that lessened the number of "alive" categories for the missing men.

The political implications of the POW/MIA issue became most acute during the Carter presidency and resulted in complete alienation of the National League of Families of Servicemen Missing in Southeast Asia from the administration. In addition,

differences of opinions in the League itself led to factionalism in the issue and a complete turnover of leadership in the organization. Just as American public opinion became increasingly disenchanted with the Vietnam War, the relatives of missing Americans also felt increasingly betrayed by the government which had sent their loved ones into the war. The POW/MIA issue simply led to further distrust, dissolution, and sorrow.

This time frame also marked the beginning of private, covert operations aimed at cross-border surveillance and direct action ostensibly to retrieve detained Americans that would peak during the Reagan presidency. Because of the geographic propinquity of Thailand, most of these were aimed at Laos. Predictably, these individuals and groups became known as the "Rambo faction" to members of more conservative, administration-supportive factions.⁹

President Reagan, a very conservative successor to President Carter, adopted a policy that was an admixture of those from preceding administrations. This manifested itself in the solution known as "fullest possible accounting" and had its basis in the assumption that resolution of all the missing Americans will never occur, but that many more cases can be resolved. This assumption was based on the belief that the governments of Indochina or private citizens of these countries, primarily the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic, may have information they are withholding or have not had an opportunity to present.¹⁰

The situation in Cambodia is more complex, as are most issues in that tortured country. The Peoples' Republic of Kampuchea has remained one of the most pariah nations in the world following the excesses of the Khmer Rouge.

The U.S. has not established formal diplomatic relations with Vietnam, President Carter's efforts at normalization notwithstanding. Even so, the U.S. has negotiated with Vietnam and has discussed, and acted upon, humanitarian issues with them. Further, some Americans--including Vietnam veterans--are now entering Vietnam on tourist and special visas. These efforts have led to some diplomatic progress and have exercised U.S./Vietnamese consular efforts. Further, the U.S. never severed diplomatic relations with Laos. However, both the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese-orchestrated Peoples' Republic of Kampuchea have refused any contact but formal government-to-government negotiations on the issue.

U.S. insistence that international organizations such as the ICRC or neutral diplomatic parties be used as intermediaries has been ignored by successive governments in Phnom Penh, and no progress or discussion has been made on the 83 Americans that were lost in that country.¹¹

Interestingly enough, the Reagan administration sharply reversed the policy of previous administrations in one regard--the issue of Americans still in captivity. The present policy is stated thusly:

"Although we have thus far been unable to prove that Americans are still being detained against their will, the information available to us precludes ruling out that possibility. Actions to investigate live-sighting

reports receive and will continue to receive necessary priority and resources based on the assumption that at least some Americans are still held captive. Should any report prove true, we will take appropriate action to ensure the return of those involved."¹²

Thus the conclusion of the Woodcock mission and the Montgomery committee that no Americans were still in captivity was overturned. Another facet of the Reagan administration's policy was the distinct separation of the POW/MIA issue from political issues such as aid, trade or the normalization of relations.¹³ Thus, by maintaining that the POW/MIA issue was strictly a bilateral humanitarian issue, the administration was able to divorce itself from the appearance of trading diplomatic relations or easing economic sanctions for the return of remains.

By subsequently announcing "pre-conditions" for discussions on normalizing relations, i. e. Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia coupled with agreements on fullest possible accounting of missing Americans, the Reagan administration provided the framework for the current operational level, albeit slow, of resolution that is on-going in Vietnam and Laos.

The repatriation of remains of missing Americans ostensibly recovered fortuitously by private Vietnamese and Lao citizens continued at a slow pace throughout the first and into the second term of the Reagan administration. Negotiations over technical considerations and introduction of discrepancy cases occupied the main dialogue maintained with the Vietnamese and Lao from 1980-1986. U.S. investigators made some progress, notably the largely unsuccessful excavation and recovery of a B-52 from the environs of Hanoi in September 1985 and the highly successful excavation,

recovery and subsequent identifications of most of the crew members of two AC-130 gunships in eastern Laos in February 1985 and February 1986.

The appointment of retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Vessey as Presidential Emissary in August 1987 added a great impetus to the issue.¹⁴ General Vessey led a U.S. policy delegation to Hanoi that same month and presented the Vietnamese a list of several discrepancy cases that the U.S. felt the Vietnamese could resolve.¹⁵ Simultaneously, another policy delegation led by Colonel Richard Childress of the National Security Council and Ms. Ann Mills Griffiths, Executive Director of the League of Families, met with the Lao Foreign Minister and Vice Foreign Minister in Vientiane to discuss the issue.¹⁶

Through subsequent negotiations and the addressal of Vietnamese humanitarian issues such as prosthetics and other medically-related problems, investigations of crashsites and capture incident locations in both North and South Vietnam became a reality in 1988. Initially, two small teams of linguists, analysts and graves registration personnel from the JCRC and CILHI, assisted by Vietnamese counterparts from the Vietnamese Office of Seeking Missing Personnel (VNOSMP) and the Medical Department of the Ministry of Defense, investigated crashsites north of Hanoi. These initial investigations were limited by the Vietnamese to 10 day periods, ostensibly because the lack of diplomatic relations made longer stays by the Americans very "difficult".

When administrative and logistical considerations proved the 10 day period untenable, the Vietnamese ameliorated these conditions and permitted larger teams and the use of U.S. equipment such as commercial four wheel drive vehicles, computers, and satellite navigation equipment for precise locating data. They also permitted USAF C-130 aircraft to ferry the teams and equipment into Vietnam. To date, eight of these combined investigations have been conducted. JCRC and CILHI personnel have investigated and, in some cases, resolved incidents from the northernmost reaches of the Red River Delta to the Camau Peninsula in the south.

Searches and excavations have continued in Laos during this same time frame with relatively better results than in Vietnam; however the vicissitudes of political conditions have allowed only intermittent progress. External factors, such as charges that Lao government officials have sanctioned drug trafficking, have led to diplomatic penalties by both the U.S. and ASEAN.

In at least one such instance, the Lao delayed the deployment of an operational JCRC-CILHI search and recovery team from Thailand for ten days. The Lao relented 36 hours after the team had returned to Hawaii, necessitating a redeployment back to Bangkok almost literally overnight.¹⁷ External resistance activities, whether real or imagined, have resulted in periodic interruptions in cooperation on the part of Lao authorities. Private forays by Americans have also created difficulties, usually overcome, in subsequent negotiation efforts with Lao decision-makers.¹⁸

There has been no change in the situation in Cambodia. As in Laos, most of the 83 missing Americans were lost in areas that were under the control of North Vietnamese forces. American non-diplomatic initiatives through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have gone unanswered as the Heng Samrin regime, probably with strong direction from Hanoi, continues to press for government-to-government dialogue.¹⁹

During the first quarter of the Bush Administration, one obstacle to any normalization activity with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was removed by the Vietnamese--their presence in Cambodia. The last Vietnamese combat forces ostensibly withdrew in September 1989. The last obstacles appear to be the final negotiated political settlement in that ruined country and the final resolution of Americans missing as a result of the second Indochina War.

ENDNOTES

1. Douglas Clarke, The Missing Man, p. 26.
2. Ibid., p. 27.
3. Larry J. O'Daniel, Missing In Action: Trail of Deceit, pp. 28-29.
4. Ibid., p. 30.
5. Nayan Chanda, Brother Enemy, p. 221.
6. Clarke, p. 56.
7. Chanda, p. 223.
8. Ibid., p. 224.
9. The Lao were particularly nervous and outraged over private forays. The allegations of Major Mark Smith in 1981 that the U.S. Government was suppressing the knowledge of prisoners held against their will in Laos was particularly damaging to subsequent efforts in that country.
10. Final Interagency Report of the Reagan Administration on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia, January 19, 1989, p. 9.
11. 75 Military personnel (carried now in the legal status of KIA/BNR) and 8 U.S. journalists (carried as simply "missing") are included in the JCRC casualty files.
12. Final Interagency Report of the Reagan Administration on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia, p. 14.
13. Ibid., p. 15.
14. Ibid., pp. 16-17.
15. Ibid., p. 18.
16. Ibid., p. 19.
17. Only the fact that the four tons of equipment and explosives were still palletized and awaiting customs inspection at Hickam Air Force Base permitted this quick redeployment.
18. A bizarre resistance activity aimed at Vietnam was a major sore point with the Lao in negotiations in Vientiane during April 1988. A large force of armed Vietnamese were detected crossing the central panhandle of Laos the month prior to the meeting. A combined Vietnamese/Lao military operation killed or captured the entire force of intruders and the Vietnamese Government subsequently publicly tried the survivors. The leader of the

resistance fighters, strangely enough, an Admiral of the former South Vietnamese Navy, was killed. Even more incredible was the fact that the raid and the aftermath were unknown to Government and Public officials in both the United States and Thailand, the launch site for the foray. The American negotiators, to say the least, were surprised when the Lao introduced this fact as the work of the CIA.

19. The Cambodian experience mirrors the one that has existed with the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) for years. Periodically, the North Koreans announce that they have U.S. remains from the Korean War and will turn them over to officials of the U.S. Government only, on a bilateral nation-to-nation agreement. The U.S., to date, has steadfastly refused and the DPRK has just as steadfastly refused to turn them over to the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission (UNCMAC), the negotiated legal organ of disputation between the two Koreas.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

If the desirable outcome of any war or conflict is a carefully restored and maintained peace, it seems that the issues associated with missing Americans have prevented this in Indochina.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, by being less than forthright in the return of remains of American servicemen, has created a pariah image of themselves that has endured well over a decade and a half. The U.S., by initially maintaining that the Vietnamese had far more knowledge of the circumstances of loss than could feasibly be possible, used this position to direct public ire away from succeeding presidential administrations and mobilize American electorate support towards the enemy. By having very little control over the situation, U.S. foreign policy options were limited to severely penalizing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam through international sanctions that included freezing monetary assets and blocking their admission to the United Nations following the war.

This, coupled with the co-opting of western allies into supporting the U.S. position, drove the Vietnamese further into the Soviet camp and reinforced their self-image as a nation who could only survive through complete militarization of their society. Thus, the domestic and international politicizing of the issue began early in the war continued beyond the war as a burning adjunct to the bi-polar super-power struggle. It also

furnished the Soviets with a regional strategic platform for its revitalized projectionable naval forces and a surrogate to threaten its primary regional adversary--The Peoples' Republic of China.

Arguably, the subsequent tragedies in Cambodia, the Sino-Vietnamese War and the ultimate complete destabilization of all of Indochina could have been partially or completely avoided if a different post-war Vietnam had emerged. This Vietnam would have been a largely demilitarized, politically and economically-stabilized responsible nation state leading the other nations of Indochina down avenues of commerce, trade, and peaceful coexistence with their brother nations in Asean and the rest of the world.

The issue of missing Americans, admittedly a result of poor policy decisions on the part of the Vietnamese, but exacerbated by shifting American policy, domestic American politics, and emotionalism, prevented this. The foreign policy overtures begun in the early 1970's and exemplified by President Nixon's initial visit to China in 1972 were epochal in the region. They could have been the cornerstone of a new order in Indochina with a non-aligned Cambodia, or at least a Cambodia of lesser hostile capabilities, if not intent, with respect to China and Vietnam.

Unfortunately, such a scenario would have required some diplomatic overtures to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam or, at minimum, a modus vivendi through a friendly non-regional nation still maintaining ties with Vietnam. Great Britain or the Federal Republic of Germany might have been such an intermediary.

Ironically, President Carter's foreign policy overtures that appeared so lamentable and misdirected in 1977-78 could have very well prevented the tangled and apparently inextricable situation that exists in the region today, particularly with the Cambodian settlement. These foreign policy initiatives would have required a completely new approach to the issue of the "China Card", but this was probably within our diplomatic and foreign policy capability in view of Sino-Soviet relations of the time.

Many of our responses to Vietnamese actions with respect to the issue appear to be psychological--a subconscious response that is understandably part of the American character that desired a better outcome of that tragic war. These responses are not unfounded. The Vietnamese were nefarious, treacherous, and wholly unattuned to American sensitivity and the importance that we as a nation attached to the return of missing Americans.

The fact that the SRV, as a national policy, "warehoused" the remains of Americans is by now almost an established fact. This mirrors the experience the French underwent following the first Indochina War. That the Vietnamese would misread American sensitivity and outrage regarding the issue of remains held hostage is astonishing, but it is indicative of their almost childlike view of international political interaction. Although their skill in negotiations and public awareness manipulation, exemplified by their war-time propaganda effort, is matchless, they remain a thoroughly militarized, closed and xenophobic society. Productive international diplomatic intercourse seems well beyond their current political and diplomatic capabilities.

However, it is equally astonishing that we would refuse to recognize that, to the Vietnamese, the issue of missing Americans was just another facet, albeit an important one, of a post-hostility strategy of rebuilding that they knew would be long and arduous. In fact, were it not for the POW/MIA issue, the Vietnamese would have been hopelessly adrift in a Soviet sphere of influence for an immeasurable amount of time.

The turnover of twenty-three remains in 1974 in Hanoi, while welcomed, was a pathetic and desperate attempt by them to maintain those tenuous ties to a nation that they knew would determine their ultimate political fate. Subsequent negotiation sessions, repatriations of remains in Hanoi conducted with quiet, dignified military honors, and the joint investigations in Vietnam have reinforced these tenuous ties.

The subject of Americans remaining in captivity is the most emotional issue. Although it was politic, well-meaning, and with a rational basis during the early years of the Reagan administration, it now requires some serious reconsideration. More than any other issue--even the heinous, barbaric remains trading that appears to be a coldly premeditated policy of the SRV--the live sighting issue has continued to be the largest divisive facet of the problem. The administration, by stating that no evidence exists to refute the fact that Americans are still being held against their will, has tied itself into a Gordian Knot. Once this policy position had been adopted, the logical assumption was that the administration would know when sufficient evidence existed to confirm the fact that no Americans

remained in captivity.

The mention of this subject in negotiations antagonizes the Vietnamese. Many arguments can be tendered that there is a good reason to taunt them with this question when the issue of discrepancy cases are considered--that there are still cases of Americans known to have been in captivity and under Vietnamese control that were never accounted for.

It can certainly be argued that some of the live prisoner theorists' beliefs could have occurred or even still be ongoing--that pilots and crew-members with highly technical skills were secretly transported to the Soviet Union for interrogation; that Americans were held in contested regions of Laos as protection from bombing or for future negotiations; or that some prisoners were held after Operation Homecoming as guarantors for war reparations. Nearly all these theories also conclude that the prisoners were murdered after their usefulness ended or after the revelation of this fact might be surfaced.

I concede that all these theories are possible, but I also believe that they are far from reality for two reasons: the Vietnamese fear that this tact would almost certainly come to light; they also know that we have the capability to determine this and act militarily, as we did at Son Tay.

Also, for the Vietnamese or Lao to continue to hold Americans we must realize that this almost certainly would have been a concerted and unanimous policy decision. High-ranking disenfranchised and defecting Vietnamese officials have confirmed the warehousing of remains as policy, but they also deny that

Vietnamese policy included the continued holding of Americans in captivity. An ethnic Chinese mortician who left the SRV through normal emigration channels testified in Hong Kong that he processed Caucasoid remains at a central location in Hanoi throughout the 1970's. Polygraph tests and corroborating cross-checks confirmed the veracity of the information he provided.¹ Forensic and anthropological data developed by CILHI also indicates that remains that had been buried had been recovered and, in some cases, treated with preservatives and stored above ground for protracted periods of time.

As painful and frustrating as the POW/MIA issue is, I believe we must face more pressing current issues. Psychologically and diplomatically, the time has come for us to look to the future. We need to address two critical questions: First, how do the Vietnamese view the U.S. nearly two decades after our withdrawal from Indochina? Secondly, how shall our countries relate to one another in the future? The key to the this latter question is whether a disenfranchised, militarized and irresponsible Democratic Republic of Vietnam is in the best interests of our country and of the free and democratized countries of southeast Asia.

During several trips into North Vietnam, I found no instances of hatred or enmity from older Vietnamese people toward Americans, even in the regions that had been heavily bombed. Similarly, I did not detect any overwhelming sense of friendliness from any of the soldiers or officers who were of an age to have fought in the south against Americans, but I could

detect no hatred or bitterness either. (I did experience some peevishness from young Vietnamese in their mid-20's and early 30's from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who were assigned as functionaries and translators in crashsite investigations. Not surprisingly, their haughty officiousness irritated not only the Americans but also the Vietnamese military and civilian personnel.)

During the next few weeks of that particular joint investigation, I had occasion to visit many crashsite locations in the Red River Delta, the Thai Nguyen area 150 kilometers north of Hanoi (the Thai Nguyen steel works, one of the most lucrative aerial targets of the war, lies midway down the north-south mountain range known as Thud Ridge), and the area southwest of Hanoi near Son Tay.

My counterparts were officers who had fought Americans in the south and were understandably close-mouthed concerning any controversial subject, but were quite voluble on apolitical subjects. However, I noticed one common characteristic of all North Vietnamese soldiers who had fought Americans: it was unmistakable even when they spoke of their accomplishments during and after the war--fighting American soldiers and marines, particularly after Tet-68 when all propaganda and legitimate political and social indicators were pointing toward a precipitous withdrawal, unnerved them.² This was well articulated during a chance encounter with the military director of the National War Museum in Hanoi. He told me that the "ferocity of the Americans after the (political) victory of TET

was unexpected".³

The air war also took its psychological toll on the general populace in the north, despite surprisingly little damage in the environs of Hanoi. One well-remembered incident evokes an elderly Vietnamese woman standing in a corn field during a crashsite search and sweeping the sky with her arms. "May bay, May bay, Bay Nam muoi hai" (air planes, air planes, B-52), her gestures unmistakably replicating endless waves of the bombers.⁴

It was readily apparent to me that the Vietnamese people do not love or hate us, but they do fear us. They obviously had, and continue to have, a great respect for what the American nation could have done militarily, but were prevented from doing politically.⁵

I believe that the experience of fighting hardened, viciously professional young Americans in the south and in the skies over the north, long after their leadership told them the war had been lost in the streets of America, has left a searing and permanent scar on the Vietnamese national character. This experience will endure and burn longer than memories of a century of French domination or milleniums of Chinese invasion.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Shaplen, Bitter Victory, p. 60.
2. Post Tet-68 was the subject of much discussion between the Vietnamese military counterparts JCRC worked with; they talked freely, even in the presence of interpreters, who naturally relayed the conversations to the non-Vietnamese speakers on the team. These types of "war stories" were never mentioned in official reports back to USCINCPAC or OSD, the operational command headquarters and policy agency respectively, unless they contained POW/MIA intelligence of interest. Similarly, military installations or items of significance were never forwarded for intelligence purposes only; the U.S. maintained, at least at the operational level, that the joint investigations were strictly in pursuit of humanitarian interests.
3. This was a purely circumstantial but fascinating meeting with LTC Ha Van Lien, military curator of the museum. When I replied to a query concerning my wartime service as an artillery officer at Khe Sanh during Tet-68, LTC Lien was summoned and introduced. LTC Lien had been a reconnaissance platoon commander at Dien Bien Phu and an air defense battalion commander at Khe Sanh, where he was wounded and invalided out of the war. The Ministry of the Interior security official was very uncomfortable with the impromptu, unscheduled meeting and LTC Lien's unsolicited remarks.
4. The middle-aged woman, we were told by the MOI officials, had been deranged by the bombings. This seemed extremely unlikely due to the absence of any military targets in her home village. Workers privately told an interpreter after the official departed that the woman had a congenital defect from birth.
5. LCOL Paul Mather, USAF, was the JCRC liaison officer in Bangkok for over 14 years and accompanied the Woodcock Commission to Hanoi in 1975. He said that he could find no evidence of bomb damage in the environs of Hanoi itself, SRV propaganda notwithstanding, although the Gia Lam railyards west of Hanoi literally still had "railroad equipment flattened and rail cars turned on end and pointing skyward". This remarkable, selfless individual is prominently mentioned in Chanda's book.

CHAPTER X

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many technical and operational recommendations have been made, and in most cases, incorporated into the Armed Services' Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape training (SERE) training and indoctrination. These range from recommendations for different or uniquely-colored parachutes for particular aircrew members (e.g. orange for aircraft commanders, yellow for co-pilots, green for enlisted crewmembers, etc.) to computerized personal authentication data in central data banks.¹ Additionally, forensic identification recommendations are also found in many sources. These recommendations vary from measurement and retention in medical records of cranial dimensions and X-rays of bone structure to the "slugging" of crash and burn-survivable crewmember identification data into aircraft prior to launch.²

The rise of terrorism in the late 1970's hastened new technological and military capabilities for the rescue of hostages; such capabilities are directly translatable into direct action POW rescue. Placement of entities such as Joint Rescue and Recovery Centers (JRRRC) in theaters of operations provides central focal points and planning agencies for SAR and evasion assistance.

In addition, lessons learned in the Son Tay Raid and at Desert One have provided a valuable baseline for the structure of units and joint doctrine to effect these missions. Further,

current U.S. special operations doctrine has redressed most of the Vietnam-era shortcomings addressed earlier in this paper. However, shortcomings exist in several areas beyond the operational aspects associated with the issue of POWs and MIAs. These shortcomings are in doctrine, organization, and finally and most critically, in national policy.

Current U.S. military doctrine needs to include planning at the tactical level for quick reaction and recovery of servicemen missing as a result of immediate combat. This should be formalized and included in combat orders and plans at the battalion and company level and could be as simple as designated units (e.g. companies in reserve) assigned with search and recovery responsibility during offensive operations. The institution of provisions for search and accountability in the tactical planning process would heighten sensitivity to early accounting for missing personnel, or hasty rescue/recovery of POWs and KIAs.

Captured or missing personnel situations beyond the immediate recovery capability of smaller units could be passed immediately to larger units with greater intelligence and operational capabilities, such as designated battalions augmented by corps lift aircraft and host-nation intelligence and linguist support.

Doctrine at the strategic level should include pre-hostility planning of possible theaters of actions for designation of arenas of escape, rescue or recovery. Escape and evasion networks, safe conduits through friendly diplomatic channels,

link-up interfaces with resistance movements or neutral elements and identification and designation of rally/rescue points should be instituted in operational plans. Responsibilities for these plans should be assigned to specified individuals and offices, such as the J-5 and Political Advisors with regional and area expertise.

Rescue and recovery operations could be exercised in an "offset" mode during normally-scheduled military exercises. For example, assuming that hostilities on the Korean peninsula could result in American air operations against targets in the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK), it would be a logical assumption that U.S. crewmembers will probably be shot down and captured. Information on North Korean military prison facilities could be collected during peacetime by normal intelligence acquisition methods and fed into larger banks of information for wartime use. Recovery and SERE exercises could then be conducted as an adjunct to annual exercises such as TEAM SPIRIT. The subsequent results could be incorporated into a BRIGHT LIGHT-type data base with the geographic and cultural homogeneity of South Korea aiding in the refinement.

The institution of or expansion of an organization such as the JCRC should be planned in the event of protracted hostilities (during relatively recent conflicts such as the raid on Libya, where Americans were initially carried as Missing in Action, the only action agency beyond command channels was the USAF casualty office; the JCRC's charter is for Vietnam-era casualties only).

At the policy level, the subject of the POW/MIA in future conflicts must be addressed at the highest level of government as evidence of American resolve and determination. Our adversaries must know and understand that successful cessation of hostilities and restoration of peace hinges on the treatment of Americans held against their will during wartime, and the fullest possible accounting for those Missing in Action after combat has ceased.

Our enemies, actual and potential, must understand these conditions perfectly, unequivocally--as a factor of their future survival.

We did not require this of our Vietnamese enemy during the Second Indochina War. This tragic oversight led to the current state of affairs described in this study.

ENDNOTES

1. JCRC, BG Kingston, Cdr, Joint Casualty Resolution Center, End of Tour Report, 10 December 1973, p. 9.
2. Ibid., p. 12.

CHAPTER XI

EPILOGUE

On 22 Mar 1989, a Russian-manufactured MI-17 helicopter circled a crudely hacked-out landing zone and slowly settled into a swirling cloud of red dust. A team of U.S. military and civilian personnel, together with Lao soldiers and officials, had returned to the Ho Chi Minh trail network of eastern Laos to find the remains of seven U.S. soldiers lost 21 years ago.

After confirming the crash location with map and compass and verifying the location with a satellite navigation locator, the team established a base camp and began the excavation of the crash site. Working rapidly but deliberately, the team cleared an area of head-high bamboo 100 meters long and 60 meters wide. Unexploded ordnance was gingerly carried to a designated area north of the excavation area for detonation by the two Explosive Ordnance Detachment personnel on the teams.

The team archaeologist from the CILHI sketched in 1 meter square grids over a map of the entire excavation site; he then oriented the map on the azimuth corresponding to the reported heading of the Vietnamese helicopter when it crashed and exploded.

After the entire crashsite area had been surveyed by transit and staked off with engineer tape, the Americans and Lao began to dig. Initially using picks and shovels, the team hacked away at the hard, dry season earth to a depth of 1 foot or until wreckage or suspected human remains were detected. Trowels or

pocket knives were then produced to carefully probe for and recover small, seemingly insignificant bits of metal, tubing or aluminum. On the fourth day, a JCRC intelligence analyst discovered a burned piece of rubber. It was carefully washed in a nearby stream and scraped carefully with a knife until it was clearly recognizable as the sole of a U.S. Army jungle boot, size 10.

Efforts then shifted into this area. Small bits of bone fragments were discovered and placed in small plastic bags, each carefully labelled with identifying locating data. Photographs were taken of each of the areas producing recognizable bone fragments. A few hours later, a Lao soldier discovered a large, circular piece of metal in a stream bed south of the main excavation site. An identifying data plate cross-checked against the H-34 technical manual and against a data field in the team's lap top computer confirmed that it was an H-34 aircraft. Although darkness was approaching, the team fanned out and began to probe the burned-over cover that is the hallmark of the slash and burn agriculture of the Laotian highlands. Soon a large metallic frame with a structure supporting nine cylinders was discovered and dragged out of the cover. This was quickly identified as the rotary engine block, and this time a carefully-scraped data plate positively identified the aircraft.

For the next few days the team continued the excavation and continued collecting small bits of fragmented bones. On two occasions, remains were identified as human teeth.

On the ninth day, four members of the team with Lao counterparts boarded a Lao military truck and drove 12 kilometers west toward Tchepone to investigate other crashsites.

In negotiations that had begun nearly a year earlier, the Americans had proposed to visit five other crashsites. These crashsites had been carefully researched from JCRC files and proposed to the Interagency Group by USCINCPAC as the most likely candidates for recovery and resolution. In Vientiane, the U.S. Charge d'affaires, with the commanders of the JCRC and CILHI in attendance, had proposed these crashsites to the Lao, who had initially refused and then relented, after ruling out one of the crashsites.

These visits, called site surveys, were essential to determine whether follow-on excavations were likely to be successful. The team identified one of the crash sites as an F4 aircraft, the tail number still clearly visible on the vertical stabilizer. Another crashsite, near the Xepon river, believed to be an AH1-G Cobra gunship, was nearly unrecognizable, except for a badly corroded section of linked 40mm ammunition. A climb up a steep hill mass led to the location of another indeterminate crash site with small bits of unidentifiable wreckage scattered along a stream bed. A map and compass check provoked a polite argument with the Lao Army major on the exact location of the crash. Verification with the satellite navigation locator prompted the team to move several hundred meters uphill to another crashsite, which was quickly identified as a resolved helicopter crash.

When the survey team returned to camp, they discovered that during their absence a U.S. Army identity tag had been discovered in the area last excavated. It bore the name of the single officer who had been on the mission.

The U.S. Navy doctor accompanying the team and sharing in the excavation responsibilities finished his medical assistance to the local villagers that evening as the EOD personnel destroyed the last of the ordnance with explosives. The team commander handed over the remainder of the medicine, consumable food and water to the district chief, brought to the campsite by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative.

Early the following day the team hastily broke camp to meet the ten-day deadline of their in-country stay and to beat the early wet season rains that had begun the evening before. Shuttling back across the central panhandle of Laos in three helicopter lifts, the team was met by two USAF C-130s at Savannakhet airfield for the return trip to Thailand and back to Hawaii.

In Bangkok, the remains were reverently placed in an aluminum transfer case, carried aboard a USAF C-141B by team members and flown for 17 hours to Hickam AFB, Hawaii. A U.S. Army general officer came aboard the aircraft, saluted the flag covered remains and carried them past an honor guard to a waiting sedan.

At the Central Identification Laboratory, the forensic identification process began with the reconstruction of the bone fragments and the analysis of the dentition with the medical

records in their data banks. On 20 December 1989, one of the soldiers was identified by restorations in the dentition.

On 1 February 1990, the Armed Forces Identification Review Board met and approved the identification of the officer and the group remains of the other six soldiers, including the soldier positively identified by dentition in December. On 23 March 1990, almost one year to the day following the recovery, the seven soldiers were interred in Arlington National Cemetery, their final resting place after the luckless mission that had begun over two decades earlier.

These identifications and interments reduced the rolls of Americans missing in Southeast Asia to 2,309. 688 of these are U.S. Army soldiers.

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